MATING IN CAPTIVITY: RECONCILING THE EROTIC AND THE DOMESTIC ESTHER PEREL, LMFT. NEW YORK 2007 www.estherperel.com

"The flame is the most subtle part of fire, moving upwards and raising itself above in the shape of a pyramid. The original primordial fire of eroticism is sexuality; it raises the red flame of eroticism, which in turn raises and feeds another flame, tremulous and blue. It is the flame of love and eroticism. The double flame of life."

Octavio Paz, The Double Flame

Love and Desire/security and adventure

- Love and desire, they relate and they conflict. Herein lies the mystery of eroticism.
- Love is about having; it seeks to know our partner. Desire is about wanting, it requires the ongoing elusiveness of the other.
- Love and desire spring from separate and distinct motives, they are separate experiences.
- Reconciliation of love and desire, passion and intimacy, is the reconciliation of two sets of conflicting fundamental human needs: the need for safety and security, stability and predictability, continuity and permanence on one hand and the need for risk and novelty, the quest for the unknown, adventure, and transcendence on the other.
- The ability to tolerate our fundamental aloneness is the key to sustaining erotic desire. It's about intermittent merging.
- Partners need to negotiate their dual needs for safety and stability with their wish for unpredictability and even risk.

More Intimacy, Less Sex

- While for some emotional connection is the well from which springs desire, for others, the greater the emotional intimacy, the lesser the erotic desire.
- Good intimacy does not necessarily make for good sex.
- For some, there is an inverse correlation between greater emotional intimacy and loss of sexual desire.
- While for some people, love, a committed relationship and emotional intimacy generate a feeling of safety which intensifies the sexual desire, for others this very intimacy creates a fear of entrapment, a fear of loss of self, a sense that familiarity is not sexy. They may experience an erotic withdrawal, and a difficulty to sexualize their partner.

Historical Introduction:

- "Human Sexuality" as we use the term originated in the 19e century
- Our view of sexuality is time bound, linked to social, economic and scientific developments.

SOCIAL: The emergence of individualism and the concept of self; this brings with it the intensification of existential separateness which leads to the need for intimacy. CLASS: Middle Class linked sex with intimacy.

ECONOMIC: Industrialization; as the individual ceases to be primarily an economic unit, sex is separated from its exclusive reproductive function.

SCIENTIFIC: Contraception frees women from the fear of pregnancy and death in childbirth; woman's pleasure is unleashed. With the advent of contraception and artificial reproduction, sexuality is no longer the sole property of the biological world, it is now socialized as a property of the self.

• Today sexuality is reflexively grasped and opened up. It is a prime connecting feature between body, self-identity and social norms (Anthony Giddens: The Transformation of Intimacy), hence its centrality in our lives, its connection to intimacy and its prominence as in the demise and ensuing divorces of many couples.

Sexuality vs Eroticism

SEXUALITY

- It is rooted in nature; all animals have sexuality.
- Has only limited possibilities.
- Is inseparable from its reproductive function.
- We are born sexual and sensuous, we become erotic.

EROTICISM

- The erotic landscape is vastly larger, richer, and more intricate than the physiology of sex, or any repertoire of sexual techniques. If a sex can be a collection of urges and acts, the erotic is a receptacle of our hopes, fears, expectations and struggles.
- It is a metaphor of sexuality.
- It is sexuality transformed by the imagination, which is exclusively human.
- By its origin, eroticism is sex/nature; by its human creation and function in society it is culture.
- It is infinite. It invites constant invention and variation.
- It thrives on the forbidden, the mysterious and the transgressive.
- Where nothing is forbidden, nothing is erotic.
- It plays with ceremony, representation and ritual.
- Pleasure is an end in itself.
- It is always plural, even in solitary pleasures, we invent imaginary others.

"High states of arousal flow from the tension between persistent problems and triumphant solutions. We are most intensely excited when we are a little offbalance, uncertain, "poised on the perilous edge between ecstasy and disaster." --Jack Morin, The Erotic Mind

"A sexual relationship is like learning a script neither of you has read. But you only notice this when one of you forgets your lines. And then, in the panic, you desperately try and remember something that you haven't really forgotten. You hope the other person will prompt you. You start to hear voices offstage. You bring another character."

--Adam Philips, Monogamy

Therapeutic considerations:

"Romance does not fade over time, it becomes riskier." --Stephen Mitchell, Can Love Last?

- Sexuality is not just a metaphor of the relationship; it is also a parallel narrative. Hence relationships can be vastly improved with no change in the sexual arena of the couple's life. Strengthening the mutuality, caring and companionate affection is not enough to generate erotic desire. Current marital literature focuses on how the couple's dynamics are reflected in the bedroom, thus starting the inquiry with the analysis of the emotional connection and then linking it to the sexual relation. Inverting the usual therapeutic priorities, and asking about their sexuality first, offers a window into the couple's interpersonal dynamics, the intra- psychic layers and the family of origin issues.
- Keep in mind that we don't know our partners as well as we think we do. To maintain the mystery and the elusiveness of our partner is key to sustaining desire.
- While we strive to create safety, it is also only an illusion. We are never totally safe from loss.
- Therapist can help couple introduce small transgressions, illicit strivings and passionate idealizations in the midst of a safe and predictable life, i.e. help them to make what is too available sufficiently interesting.
- Challenge the emphasis on verbal communication and recognize that intimacy speaks many languages.
- Grant permission for fantasy, draw pleasure from the hidden, the mysterious and the suggestive; expand the boundaries while respecting the need for safety and stability.

"If it is the forbidden that is exciting, if desire is fundamentally transgressive, then the monogamists are like the very rich; they have to find their poverty, they have to starve themselves enough, in other words they have to work if only to keep what is always to available, sufficiently illicit to be interesting."

Adam Philips, "Monogamy"

Dialectic between the emotional and the erotic

- Dynamics that are emotionally challenging can, when eroticized, become highly desirable: power, control, surrender, vulnerability, dependence.
- The reverse is also true: what is emotionally attractive can be sexually undesirable: safety, familiarity, predictability.
- Our erotic impulses have the unique capacity to transform, undo and avenge traumas, hurts and frustrations and challenges we faced growing up into sources of excitation of pleasure.
- Our adult erotic patterns are launched early in our life. The erotic mind is layered with early childhood experiences of touch, play, or trauma, which become "cornerstones" of our erotic life later. (Morin)



Body

"Poetry is the eroticism of language, eroticism is the poetry of the body" Octavio Paz, The Double Flame

- The body is our original mother tongue and our first home; it is a separate language; we are all bilingual.
- The body is imprinted in the individual's history and the culture's admonitions.
- For some the body is the land of freedom, where they feel uninhibited, and where they can transcend conventions, a place for play, creativity and self-soothing. (often the partner with a high sexual desire).
- For others it can represent the gathering place of taboos, inhibitions and abuse; a home they inhabit, but in which they feel restricted. (often the partner with low or less desire).
- The body should be granted its capacity for soothing and for communicating in its own language.

Cultural tensions

- between the cultural pressures that domesticate marital sex-rationality, stability, directness and responsibility -- and the indirect, suggestive, playful qualities that underlie erotic excitement.
- between the egalitarian, ideals of fairness, compromise and equality of couples therapy and the undemocratic and rebellious spirit of eroticism.
- between the graphic, explicit exposure of sex and the proliferation of pornography on the one hand and the need for the hidden that is essential to erotic desire
- between recognizing that some women desire erotic submission and the fear that it will sanction male dominance elsewhere
- Power, control and aggression are all part of the erotic enigma; they live in the shadow of desire.

Erotic Imagination

- Freedom of our imagination unfolds in the sanctuary of our mind.
- Fantasy is autonomy, separateness in the mind allows for connection in the body. Not all fantasies need to be shared.
- Erotic couples respect each other's erotic privacy, which is not the same as secrets.
- Fantasies are not experiences we necessarily want, they often stretch much further than we ever would in reality. They free us from moral, social and psychological constraints. We can surprise ourselves in our fantasies, break taboos, thrive on the illicit, lurid; the shadow parts of ourselves can find expression.
- Men fantasize multiple partners' perfect bodies, women about idyllic situations and environments.
- Too often fantasy seen as a temporary insanity of the beginning, immature pleasures destined to fade under the rigors of the serious, responsible business of marriage or commitment.
- Deprived of freedom on the inside of their relation, people will seek expression on the outside.
- To objectify is a way to emphasize the quality of the otherness and of the person we desire, that he/she is outside ourselves.

Summary:

WHAT DIMINISHES DESIRE?

- To much familiarity, comfort
- Boredom and emotional disengagement
- Lack of novelty and variation
- The transition to motherhood
- Busy, stressful lives-
- De-erotization of the partner
- The contrived illusion of safety

WHAT MAINTAINS DESIRE?

- Fluid communication, intimacy, emotional differentiation
- Validation, being seen
- Separateness and space, difference
- Seduction, anticipation, playfulness, novelty, curiosity
- Ability to tolerate our fundamental alones Not fully knowing our partner
- Playfulness, variation, uncertainty, unpredictability, mystery
- Our erotic perception of our partner
- Fantasy and imagination
- The respect for sexual idiosyncrasies; they are key to who we are.
- Stay out of the bed.
- Limited intake of pornography
- Erotic privacy (secrets hurt intimacy, privacy enhances it)
- To know that we do not own our partner
- Permission to reach beyond our limits, to transcend our boundaries
- Permission to experience aggression and power; i.e. power plays, role reversals, unfair advantages, imperious demands, seductive manipulations, subtle cruelties

Esther Perel @New York, 2007